

## The Greatest Commandment

Mark 12:28-34

<sup>28</sup> One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" <sup>29</sup> Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; <sup>30</sup> you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' <sup>31</sup> The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." <sup>32</sup> Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; <sup>33</sup> and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,'—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." <sup>34</sup> When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.

In the twenty-first century we have a hard time figuring out the true meaning of love. The word is used so freely: we love God, we love our families, we love our animals, we love food, we love things. Each use of “love” means something slightly or extremely different. In light of this confusion about love, what does it mean to love God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, all our strength? The Word in Life Study Bible says this to say about our passage and loving God:

When Jesus recited the greatest of the commandment, He repeated the word “all” four times in what it means to love God. What aspects of life was He including *in how we are to love God*? For the typical American who has lived to be 75 years old, we will spend life: 9% in church, 8% in preschool, 12% in school, 39% working, 28% time off, and 18% in retirement.

In light of this use of our time, when does a person “love the Lord God” as Jesus commanded? Is that limited to what one does for an hour or so on Sunday morning? If so, then worship takes up a mere 3,900 hours, or 0.9%, of one’s waking life – assuming that one goes to church every Sunday for 75 years!

Is that what Jesus had in mind? No, Christ is Lord of all of life – not just Sunday morning, but weekdays, too, including time at work. He is Lord not

only of our time, but of our money and possessions as well. Unfortunately, many of us in the West have developed some dangerous attitudes in these areas that push God to the fringes of life. For example:

Myth: One-seventh of our time belongs to God. We speak of Sunday as “the Lord’s day,” a day of religion. And so it might be if Christians worshiped from sunup to sundown. But for most people Sunday worship means an hour-long service before an afternoon of televised sporting events. Thus the “day of worship” is effectively reduced to less than one-twentieth of the week.

That was never what God intended. Originally the seventh day or Sabbath rest was viewed as the completion of the week, not a break or separation from the work week. It was a time for review, celebration, and restoration.

By Jesus’ day there were major distortions regarding the Sabbath. It had become a day of legalistic ritual. Jesus sought to restore it as a day of compassion and worship (Luke 6:1-11; John 5:1-18).

Dedication of all of our time to God does not mean apportioning so much to family, so much to a job, so much for ourselves, and a little left over for God. No, all 168 hours of the week, all 52 weeks of the year, and all of the years of a lifetime belong to God and are on loan to us to manage for Him.

Another Myth: Ten percent of our money belongs to God. Some of us believe that God expects us to give a flat 10 percent of our income to church or other ministries. The reality is that on the average, American Christians give 2.3 percent of our income to religious or charitable causes of some kind.

The underlying principle that needs to be considered is that God has given us the ability to earn money, so actually all 100 percent of our

earnings belong to God. We are called to manage our money – not just what we give away, but what we keep, too – according to God’s values. Tithing was intended as a discipline to remind God’s people that all of what we have or earn belongs to God. Originally a voluntary activity (Genesis 14:13-24; 28:20-22), it was intended for the care of others and as a representation of the worship of God (Deut. 26:1-19). Tithing was never intended to replace obedience to all of God’s commands (Matthew 23:23-24).

Another Myth: Only some real estate belongs to God. Too many of us have fallen into a dangerous pattern of identifying a few buildings as the Lord’s property – religious institutions like churches, schools, and church-owned hospitals. By implication other real estate is ours to do with as we please.

However, scripture opposes that view. Paul says that “all things were created through Him and for Him” (Colossians 1:16). Even our bodies are “temples of God” (1 Corinthians 6:19). God calls us to serve Him in all that we do (Colossians 3:17). Therein lays the path to true blessing, peace, and truth. Christ has come to break our bondage to anything less. Equipped by His Spirit within us and instructed by His written Word, we can live wholly for the kingdom.

Our scripture with its teaching about love of God and neighbor is one of the foundational texts that express simply and yet comprehensively the heart, spirit, and soul of Christianity. In our diverse faith communities, this text provides the framework for ethical thinking and conduct, reflection, and biblical understanding. Our words or actions are to reflect and embody love of God and neighbor. Saint Augustine wrote, "Whoever, therefore, thinks that he [or she] understands the divine Scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build the double love of God and of our neighbor does not understand it at all."

This teaching about love of God and neighbor has a powerful and rich universal appeal that transcends literary and cultural contexts. In his conversation with the scribe, Jesus found common ground by affirming the rich heritage that had provided the foundation for his own teaching and ministry. When the scribe asked Jesus to describe the most important commandment, Jesus spoke the words of a passage known in Judaism by its first word: Hear or *Shema* in Hebrew. The Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-9) calls Israel's attention to the allegiance and complete commitment that is due to God alone.

It reads:

<sup>4</sup> Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.

<sup>5</sup> You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

<sup>6</sup> Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.

<sup>7</sup> Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.

<sup>8</sup> Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead,

<sup>9</sup> and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

The Shema speaks powerfully to peoples of diverse traditions and faiths. Mark wrote with the understanding that this creed calls forth absolute devotion, obedience, and commitment from the heart, soul, mind, and strength.

The focus on love in our scripture came at a very critical moment in the life and ministry of Jesus. His ministry was centered in Jerusalem, and he had set himself against the temple cult. He had overturned tables and driven people out of the temple (11:15-18); the religious leaders had engaged him in debate (11:27-33; 12:13-17, 18-27); they were

angered by his teaching, and wanted to arrest him (12:1-12; 11:18); his death at their hands was imminent (8:31; 9:30-31; 10:32-34). Jesus spoke words whose very particular demands were foundational to the faith.

These same words of love offered a sharp critique of the teachings of the scribes, who had been guardians of the religious establishment. At every turn the scribes had opposed Jesus with questions about his authority and the source of his power (2:6, 16; 3:22; 7:1, 5). Repeatedly, Jesus had demonstrated that the scribes were on the wrong side of the work of God. In this scripture one scribe stood in solidarity with Jesus and commended him for his insight (12:28), as well as for the soundness and truthfulness of his teaching (v. 32). He stood in solidarity with Jesus, who had just recently placed the spotlight on certain corrupt and disconcerting practices within the temple. The scribe shared Jesus' anguish over a temple cult that had lost its soul and purpose, its moral authority, its heart for renewal, and could no longer hear, discern, or be responsive to the divine voice. The scribe offered his strong conviction that a life marked by love of God and love of neighbor is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices (v. 33).

Mark did not remind us who our neighbor is, but we remember that the Hebrew scriptures called forth love and compassion for the widow, orphan, foreigner, poor, or slave; or today to call forth love for migrants, poor and homeless people, the victims of ecological and economic injustice, and those ravaged by disease, war, and violence. This scribe heard Jesus say to him: "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (v. 34). He understood that love of neighbor must be combined with true worship of God.

We, as a community of faith, celebrate the kingdom of God as the proclamation of the good news of God (1:14). In the ministry of Jesus, this proclamation was accompanied by the casting out of demons (1:39) and the healing of many who were sick (1:40-42; 5:12-13). It is the good news of God that does not command, coerce, or mandate love, but rather evokes worship, love, and obedience. Love is known in true worship, teaching, faith, and practice among God's people.

The story of love is not complete until we see the cross of Jesus and the power of God. The Gospel presents us with love, worship, and discipleship and invites us to anticipate that the scribe experienced the full life of love of God and neighbor when love embraced him. Then he in joyful obedience took up his cross and followed where only love could lead. **Lincoln E. Galloway**

So, what we do know is when we use the word love in relation to the divine or with people, we want the best for them, we want them to be pleased, we want them to have joy. To love God with heart, soul, mind and strength is to live in obedience and as stewards of his resources. To love neighbor is to love self and give respect and help to all we meet. Jesus calls us to kingdom loving and kingdom living.

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